

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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March 20, 1971

MEMORANDUM OF BRIEFING

PRESENT: Henry A. Kissinger  
Colonel Kennedy  
David R. Young (note taker)

SUBJECT: Laos (Lamson 719)  
Cambodia (Toan Thang) 01/71

BRIEFER: Lt. Colonel Martin

DATE: March 19, 1971, 10:00 a.m.

Martin: Their overall strategy now is to get moved out and the first regiment will be moving in.

Kissinger: When?

Martin: We don't have the time schedule now.

Kissinger: It looks like even 92 is now going to be open.

Martin: That is correct, 92 will no longer be blocked.

Kissinger: What I don't understand is how no one could have known that they were going to pull out this quickly. The Secretary of State was just briefed on Wednesday. He didn't know anything about it either.

Martin did not reply. He mentioned that there had been two contacts with about 20 and 18 enemy KIA the previous day and in another report, over 500 enemy KIA.

Kissinger: Do you really believe that?

Martin: Well, quite frankly, sir, it is hard to believe, except that the unit that is reporting this says that they only have 82 fighting men left. It may be that both sides took heavy losses.

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Kissinger: What did they do? Did they just bug out?

Martin: Well, yes sir, I think they did. I think the enemy's tactic now is to lock on and inflict maximum casualties -- and this is what they've done..

Kissinger: Did our people fight?

Martin: Speaking only for myself as Colonel Martin, I would say that they ran for the LZs and they were shot at as they ran. In that unit with 82 left there are a hundred or so unaccounted for, which may mean that they're just missing or prisoners.

Kissinger: Are they being clobbered because they are bugging out, or are they bugging out because they are being clobbered?

Martin: My view is that they are being clobbered because they are bugging out.

(Kissinger then returned to the question of the major movement out.)

Kissinger: When did we know that they were going to move out?

Martin did not answer.

Kissinger: Well then, Colonel Martin when did you know?

Martin: I would rather have you ask the Chairman that question. It is my impression that you knew at the same time the Chairman did.

Kissinger: Until Wednesday morning I thought they were going to come out down through Base Area 611 and that we would have Phase V starting around April 15, but now it is really too late to reverse it. What they did was go ahead with the withdrawal plan which they allegedly cancelled. We can never reconstitute the operation. Isn't that right?

Martin: Yes, that's right.

Kissinger: The real tragedy here is that we were within one division of a decisive victory and we missed because that one division was not put in. How do you personally feel about this?

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Martin: That is true, but there is another real unknown here which you should be aware of and that is that the real tragedy is going to be the morale of the ARVN units coming out. These are supposed to be some of their best units; the ones that are to block just south of the DMZ. The people coming out are coming out with the feeling that they have been beaten. They are scrambling for the helicopters and they are being shot at. The morale of the men in the field is going to be low.

Kissinger: Yes, and one of the by-products that we had thought we would get from this was the fact that the ARVN had fought them and stood up to them and that their confidence had grown. If we had just put in one more division the enemy would have had to throw in the towel and the psychology would have run the other way. What is your personal assessment of the net effect of the whole operation?

Martin: Well, we've gone in there and we've killed a lot of bodies; we might even have killed up to 10,000. Probably not where they report them but with all the bombing, they must have lost heavily. The real goal, however, of interdicting and completely disrupting the north/south logistics lines we have not accomplished. We have made a dent, but we did not do what we set out to do.

Kissinger: This is my feeling as well. Of course, we have in addition forced them to chew up supplies in this operation itself. But for all this we paid a god damn heavy domestic price. It would be interesting to find out what made them think that they could do it to begin with.

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Martin: After such a good day yesterday in having those contacts which I reported, they decide to take the day off. They really should have locked in on the Chup Plantation but they didn't. Once they had them they stopped.

Kissinger: Would Tri have pursued them and hung on?

Martin: Yes he might have grabbed on and pushed them.

Kissinger: Was the division commander at fault here? Was it his decision?

Martin: Probably it was in this case.

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Kissinger: What did Tri do?

Martin: He just bypassed his division commanders and went in there himself.

(Martin then pointed to the situation in Snoul. By and large they were again avoiding all contact with the enemy.)

Kissinger: They're really moving out! They're behaving like they used to when I was out there. You could always avoid the enemy by following where the ARVN went. They always had far less contacts than any equivalent American unit. This confirms my belief that they really have a good intelligence operation.

(Martin then pointed out that what he was afraid of was that if the Chup Operation did not go forward and did not force the enemy to bring back reinforcements to help, then the units that were sitting on the border of South Vietnam would once again start making their forays in-country.)

End of Briefing.

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